

Central Intelligence Agency



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DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

4 December 1987

Syria After Amman: The Threat to Israel [redacted]

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Summary

Syrian President Assad's conciliatory behavior at the Amman Summit underscored his deep concern about his country's economic crisis and highlighted, once again, his skill as a political tactician. On the contentious issue of his "strategic alliance" with Iran, he set the stage for a protracted period of "fence-sitting," which he probably calculates will prolong his leverage with both Iran and the moderate Arab states without foreclosing his option to switch sides altogether, if the price is right. In contrast, Assad's paramount goals--Syria's pursuit of strategic parity with Israel and primacy in the Arab world's struggle against Israel--were endorsed by the Arab leaders meeting in Amman last month. Although Syria's economic distress has weakened its ability to use conventional military forces against Israel, Assad's resolve to maintain pressure on Israel may even be stronger. His means include the use of low cost terrorist tactics and the creation of a credible strategic deterrent in the form of chemical weapons production. [redacted]

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This memorandum was prepared by [redacted] the Levant Branch, Arab-Israeli Division, Office of Near Eastern and South Asian Analysis. Information as of 4 December 1987 was used in its preparation. Questions and comments should be addressed to Chief, Arab-Israeli Division [redacted]

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Poor Economy Forcing Emphasis on Unconventional Warfare

Syria's economic crisis has forced Assad to make adjustments--some of which he probably views as temporary--in his pursuit of strategic parity with Israel. ^{1/} Early this year, for example, he reduced the Army's standing strength and drastically cut back its training schedule. To compensate for his military's lagging conventional capabilities, Assad evidently tried to push Syria's closely-held chemical weapons production program by committing scarce financial resources to its improvement and expansion. Recent Syrian-sponsored attacks in or near northern Israel--most notably the PFLP-GC's successful hang-glider assault in late November--again demonstrate that Damascus perceives surrogate attacks as a particularly useful means of keeping pressure on Israel at times when conventional military action is deemed too risky or costly. [REDACTED]

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Syria's Reduced Military Readiness...

The Syrian Army was particularly hard hit this year by spending cuts and widespread shortages of fuel, ammunition, spare parts, and medical supplies. These shortages and the absence of any division-level exercises for nearly two years suggest that the Army cannot sustain intensive combat for long. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] critical shortages of basic medical supplies such as X-ray film, antibiotics, and intravenous solution packages, have eroded Syria's ability to deal with any crisis involving mass casualties. [REDACTED]

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^{1/} Assad defines "strategic parity" as involving not only the military balance between Syria and Israel, but also a counterbalance of economic and social factors, such as technical and educational capabilities. The allocation of Syria's limited financial resources within the economy reveals, however, that, of these factors, Assad's highest priority is the military balance--particularly the quantitative equation as opposed to qualitative aspects. [REDACTED]

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Assad's decision early this year--apparently taken in response to Soviet recommendations--to deactivate selected brigades and redistribute their troops also probably has eroded the Army's readiness, at least in the short term. [redacted]

[redacted] that the Soviets had urged this redistribution of personnel to increase the manning levels and combat effectiveness of the active brigades. [redacted]

[redacted] only three brigades have been deactivated so far. The erratic pace and varying procedures by which this decision has been implemented suggest some foot-dragging among Syrian division commanders, who may be concerned about the lack of dry-clad protective material to keep stored equipment operationally ready. [redacted]

In contrast to the ground forces, however, training activity by Syrian air and naval forces has not declined appreciably during 1987 and actually became increasingly complex. In particular, joint air and naval training increased along the Mediterranean coast, probably in part because of Syria's heightened appreciation of the weakness of its own coastal defenses following the US airstrikes against Libya last year. Moscow's delivery since July of at least 21 of the long-awaited MiG-29 aircraft, moreover, provided a psychological boost to the Syrian Air Force. Even completion of the contract--probably for two squadrons totaling 40-50 aircraft--is unlikely, however, to detract from Israeli air superiority. [redacted]

Assad's forces continue to plan and train for offensive operations against Israel, but economic realities and the qualitative military balance favoring Israel argue persuasively against any Syrian-instigated attack using conventional forces in the foreseeable future. [redacted]

... and Heightened Paranoia

We believe that the unusually high alert posture of the Syrian military during Assad's attendance at the Amman Summit suggests that Syrian officials are acutely concerned about the military's weakened ability to respond quickly and effectively to crises.

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Upswing in Syrian-sponsored Palestinian Attacks Against Israel?

With his military buildup stalled for most of the past year, Assad probably views Syrian-supported Palestinian attacks against Israeli forces in southern Lebanon or Israel as the most effective means of asserting Syria's leading role in the Arab struggle with Israel. As long as such attacks continue to provoke only selective Israeli retaliatory strikes, Assad probably views them as involving acceptable risks. The risks probably would become unacceptable, in Assad's view, if the Israelis inflict numerous casualties upon Syrian forces in Lebanon or expand their retaliatory raids into Syria. The Syrian military is ill-equipped to deal with mass casualties and--short of fuel, spare parts, and ammunition--almost certainly could not mount an effective counteroffensive.

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The magnitude of Israeli retaliatory attacks for the PFLP-GC hang-glider attack on 25 November probably will be one key to Damascus's attempts to gauge levels of acceptable risk in planning future Palestinian operations against Israel.

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Both the PFLP-GC and Damascus almost certainly expect, at a minimum, a measured Israeli response, such as airstrikes against a PFLP-GC facility in the Bekaa Valley or, at worst, nearby Syrian military deployments. We believe the Syrians calculate that Israeli attacks against Palestinian facilities inside Syria are less likely.

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Although the hang-glider attack was the third known infiltration attempt by Syrian-sponsored groups this year, its success--six Israeli soldiers killed and seven wounded inside Israel--will compel Israeli hardliners to push for retaliation on a disproportionately larger scale. For instance, they almost certainly advocate retaliating against Palestinian training facilities inside Syria. Unexpectedly devastating or bolder Israeli attacks against Syrians in Lebanon or against facilities in Syria almost certainly would shake Assad's confidence temporarily and compel him to suspend plans for additional operations against Israel. Alternatively, Assad would be emboldened if, during such an Israeli attack, Syrian forces managed to shoot down Israeli aircraft or capture Israeli personnel. [REDACTED]

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A Hidden Weapon: Syrian Chemical Weapons Production

We believe Assad views Syria's chemical weapons production program as a means of compensating in part for Syria's lagging conventional military capabilities. With the regular military particularly ill-prepared to sustain prolonged combat with Israel, Assad probably views his chemical weapons arsenal, which consists of SCUD missiles equipped with chemical warheads and chemical bombs, as a crucial deterrent against extensive Israeli attacks on military and industrial facilities inside Syria. [REDACTED]

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Despite the costs involved, the Syrians apparently relocated some of their chemical weapons production equipment to more secure locations following press reporting in early 1986 that revealed the existence of the program. The bulk of Syria's chemical weapons production facilities are now probably located underground, where they would be less vulnerable to Israeli airstrikes. [REDACTED]

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Outlook

Assad's endorsement of Palestinian attacks against Israeli forces in northern Israel, despite the Syrian military's weakened

ability to cope with severe Israeli retaliatory strikes, underscores his need to assert Syria's position as the vanguard among the Arab confrontation states. With the latest PFLP-GC glider attack, Assad is testing his "brinksmanship" skills once again, apparently gambling that the Israelis will not respond with disproportionate violence. He also may calculate that the Israelis will not risk handing him yet another moral victory by losing even one aircraft to dense Syrian air defenses around Damascus in an effort to attack PFLP-GC bases near the Syrian capital. [REDACTED]

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If Assad has gambled successfully with the latest attack, he may try raising the ante with additional, equally sensational Palestinian attacks inside northern Israel. He almost certainly does not want to risk direct military confrontation with Tel Aviv, however, and will back off--at least temporarily--if the stakes appear too high. In the event the Israelis conduct airstrikes against Palestinian camps in Syria, Assad almost certainly will not retaliate immediately or directly. The odds that he or the Israelis will miscalculate each other's intentions in Lebanon and clash there remain high. [REDACTED]

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Syria's conventional military capabilities will not improve sufficiently to encourage Assad to risk war with Israel, at least within the next year. Syrian-backed Palestinian attacks against Israeli forces in South Lebanon and in Israel, therefore, represent Assad's most effective way of keeping pressure on Israel. Assad almost certainly judges that Israeli uncertainty about Syria's intentions regarding its chemical weapons program, moreover, will deter Tel Aviv from ordering massive preemptive or large-scale retaliatory attacks on facilities inside Syria unless war is clearly imminent. [REDACTED]

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SUBJECT: Syria After Amman: The Threat to Israel [REDACTED]

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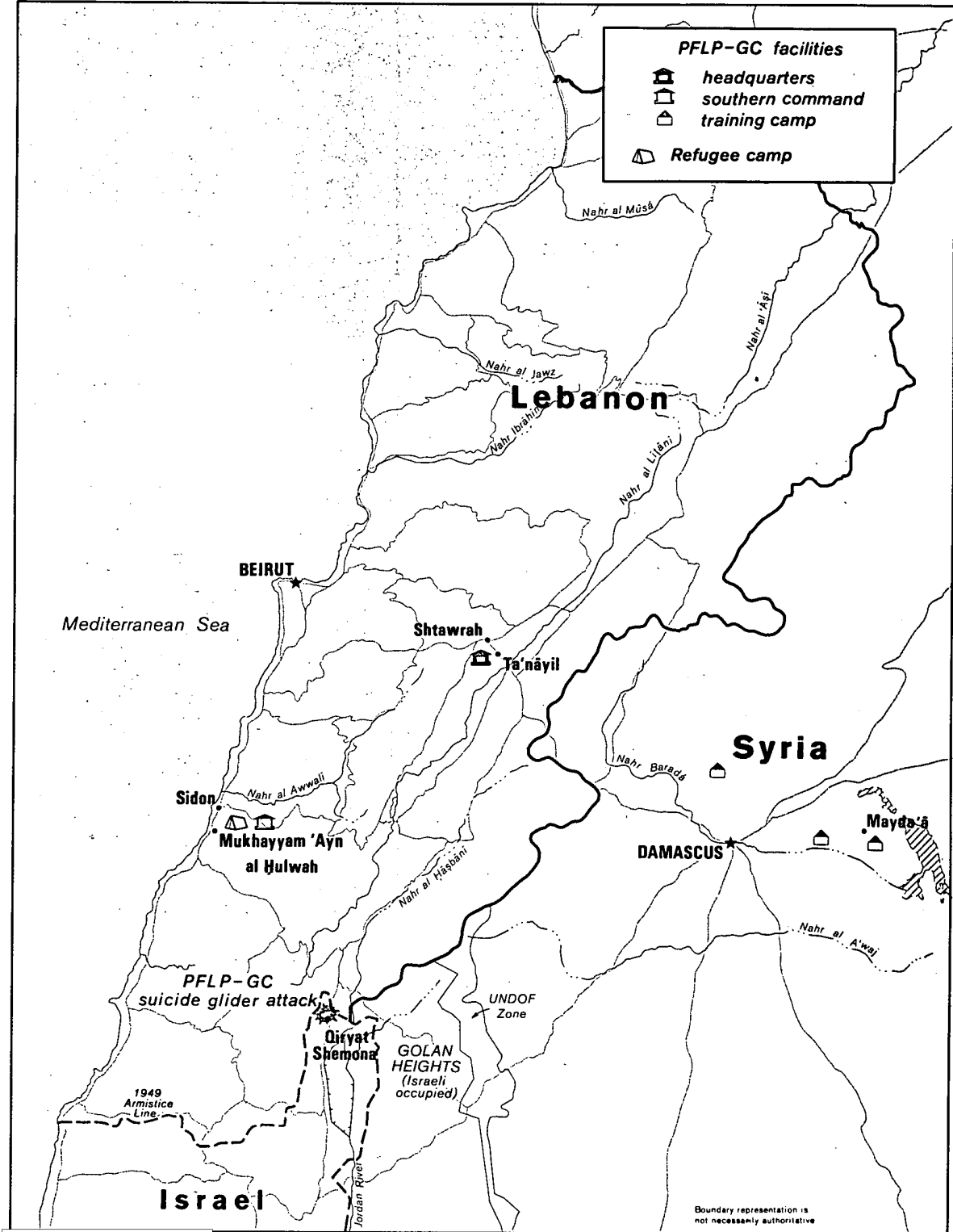
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